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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000011

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 11/6/2016
TAGS: [IR](#) [PGOV](#)
SUBJECT: ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS ELECTION -- HARBINGER OF FUTURE
CHANGES?

REF: A. DUBAI 1217, B. RPO DUBAI 0008

RPO DUBAI 00000011 001.3 OF 002

CLASSIFIED BY: JILLIAN BURNS, DIRECTOR, IRAN REGIONAL PRESENCE
OFFICE, DEPARTMENT OF STATE.
REASON: 1.4 (D)

1.(C) SUMMARY: ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD ON DECEMBER 15 FOR THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS, THE 86-MEMBER CLERICAL BODY THAT ELECTS AND NOMINALLY SUPERVISES THE SUPREME LEADER. SEVERAL IRPO CONTACTS HAVE PREDICTED LOW VOTER TURNOUT, NOTING THAT THE ELECTION WILL BRING NO IMMEDIATE CHANGES, AND CITIZENS HAVE LITTLE INCENTIVE TO VOTE. OTHERS SAY THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS ELECTION HAS THE POTENTIAL OF IMPACTING FUTURE POWER ALIGNMENTS IN THE IRANIAN REGIME. THEY NOTE THAT THE ELECTIONS WILL REFLECT THE RESULTS OF A POWER STRUGGLE BETWEEN AYATOLLAH MESBAH-YAZDI, THE ARCH-CONSERVATIVE SPIRITUAL ADVISOR OF AHMADINEJAD, AND EXPEDIENCY COUNCIL CHAIRMAN ALI AKBAR RAFSANJANI, WHO IS ALSO CURRENTLY THE DEPUTY SPEAKER OF THE ASSEMBLY. ELECTION COVERAGE IN THE IRANIAN PRESS LARGELY CENTERS ON CANDIDATE LISTS, AND THE ATTEMPTED USE, IN AT LEAST ONE CASE, OF THE RELIGIOUS QUALIFICATION EXAM TO BAR A REFORMIST CANDIDACY. ONE CHALLENGE FOR THE US WILL BE HOW TO FRAME OUR PUBLIC STATEMENTS ABOUT THE ELECTION OF THIS CONTROVERSIAL BODY. END SUMMARY.

2.(U) ON DECEMBER 15, ELECTIONS FOR THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS -- THE CLERICAL BODY THAT ELECTS AND NOMINALLY SUPERVISES THE SUPREME LEADER -- WILL BE HELD. (NOTE: WHILE THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS IS CONSTITUTIONALLY AUTHORIZED TO ELECT, SUPERVISE AND EVEN REPLACE THE SUPREME LEADERS, THE SUPREME LEADERS POWER AND INFLUENCE GREATLY CONSTRAINS THE SUPERVISORY ROLE.) THE ASSEMBLY IS AN 86-MEMBER BODY ELECTED ONCE EVERY EIGHT YEARS IN NATIONWIDE POLLS. IT MEETS TWICE A YEAR IN CLOSED SESSIONS. 492 CANDIDATES REGISTERED FOR THE ELECTIONS, INCLUDING 13 WOMEN. (NOTE: INITIAL PRESS REPORTS INDICATED THAT 495 CANDIDATES REGISTERED, BUT THREE REPORTEDLY REGISTERED TWICE, MAKING THE ACTUAL NUMBER OF CANDIDATES 492. ENDNOTE.). CANDIDATES MUST PASS GUARDIAN COUNCIL VETTING, AND EACH MUST BE A QUALIFIED MUJTAHED, SOMEONE WITH THE RELIGIOUS QUALIFICATIONS TO INTERPRET

ISLAMIC LAW AND ISSUE RELIGIOUS DECREES.

3.(U) ACCORDING TO IRANIAN PRESS REPORTS, 204 CANDIDATES WERE REQUIRED TO TAKE A RELIGIOUS QUALIFICATIONS EXAM, OF WHICH 37 REFUSED, INCLUDING FOUR SITTING MEMBERS OF THE ASSEMBLY. REFORMIST CLERIC AND SENIOR MEMBER OF THE MILITANT CLERICS SOCIETY MAJID ANSARI WAS ONE OF THE FOUR SITTING MEMBERS WHO REFUSED TO TAKE THE EXAM, AND HIS CASE RECEIVED PARTICULAR PRESS ATTENTION BECAUSE OF CLAIMS THAT THE GUARDIAN COUNCIL WAS USING THE RELIGIOUS QUALIFICATION REQUIREMENT TO BAR REFORMISTS FROM COMPETING. ONE PRESS REPORT LATER CITED AN "INFORMED SOURCE" AS SAYING THAT ANSARI WOULD BE EXEMPTED FROM HAVING TO TAKE THE EXAM, SINCE HE HAD PREVIOUSLY PASSED IT. GUARDIAN COUNCIL VETTING WILL TAKE PLACE FROM OCTOBER 15 TO NOVEMBER 15. CANDIDATES WHO PASS THE VETTING PROCESS WILL THEN HAVE FROM NOVEMBER 30 TO DECEMBER 15 TO CAMPAIGN.

WILL WOMEN CANDIDATES BE ALLOWED?

4.(U) NO WOMEN CURRENTLY SIT ON THE ASSEMBLY, AND WOMEN WHO ATTEMPTED TO RUN IN THE LAST ASSEMBLY ELECTION WERE BARRED FROM COMPETING. IN RECENT MONTHS, THERE HAS BEEN DEBATE INSIDE THE COUNTRY ABOUT WHETHER WOMEN WILL BE PERMITTED TO COMPETE THIS YEAR. SEVERAL RELIGIOUS LEADERS, INCLUDING HARD-LINE CLERIC AND CANDIDATE AYATOLLAH MOHAMMED TAQI MESBAH-YAZDI, GAVE QUALIFIED SUPPORT FOR THE IDEA OF WOMEN'S CANDIDACIES, SAYING THAT WOMEN WHO HAD ATTAINED THE REQUISITE LEVEL OF RELIGIOUS LEARNING (I.E. QUALIFIED MUJTAHEDS) SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO COMPETE. SUCH A STATEMENT ALLOWS FOR THE APPEARANCE OF OPENNESS, BUT IN REALITY THERE ARE FEW FEMALE MUJTAHEDS. ACCORDING TO DOMESTIC PRESS, TWO WOMEN CANDIDATES TOOK THE RELIGIOUS QUALIFICATIONS EXAM.

POWER STRUGGLE FOR ASSEMBLY AND POSSIBLY SUPREME LEADERSHIP

5.(S) THERE IS REPORTEDLY A POWER STRUGGLE BREWING FOR THE FUTURE LEADERSHIP OF THE ASSEMBLY BETWEEN HARD-LINE CLERIC AYATOLLAH MESBAH-YAZDI AND EXPEDIENCY COUNCIL CHAIRMAN ALI AKBAR RAFSANJANI. MESBAH-YAZDI, WHO IS THE SPIRITUAL ADVISOR OF PRESIDENT AHMADINEJAD, REGISTERED FOR THE ELECTION FOLLOWING MONTHS OF SPECULATION THAT HE WOULD ATTEMPT TO GAIN CONTROL OF THE BODY. HE IS SUPPORTED LARGELY BY HARD-LINERS AND THOSE AFFILIATED WITH AHMADINEJAD. RAFSANJANI, WHO IS ALSO CURRENTLY THE DEPUTY SPEAKER OF THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS, SIGNED UP FOR THE ELECTION ON THE LAST DAY OF REGISTRATION. RAFSANJANI IS MOSTLY SUPPORTED BY TRADITIONAL AND MODERATE CONSERVATIVES, AS WELL AS SOME REFORMISTS, WHO ARE IN THE MINORITY AMONG THE CANDIDATES FOR THE ASSEMBLY. NASSER HADIAN, AN IRANIAN POLITICAL ANALYST, PREDICTED THAT IF THE POLITICAL MAKE-UP OF THE ASSEMBLY REMAINS

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ESSENTIALLY THE SAME, RAFSANJANI WOULD LIKELY BECOME SUPREME LEADER WERE KHAMENEI TO BECOME INCAPABLE OF CARRYING OUT THE OFFICE. IF MESBAH-YAZDI AND HIS SUPPORTERS WERE TO GAIN A MAJORITY IN THE ASSEMBLY, THE HARD-LINE CLERIC MAY THEN POSITION HIMSELF TO SUCCEED KHAMENEI AS SUPREME LEADER.

6.(C) THE CURRENT SPEAKER OF THE ASSEMBLY, AYATOLLAH ALI MESHKINI, REGISTERED FOR THE DECEMBER ELECTIONS, DESPITE RUMORS OF HIS FAILING HEALTH. IT IS VIRTUALLY CERTAIN THAT MESHKINI WILL BE RE-ELECTED AND MAINTAIN THE LEADERSHIP OF THE BODY, BUT BECAUSE OF HIS HEALTH CONCERNS THERE IS PUBLIC SPECULATION THAT HE WILL NOT BE ABLE TO SERVE ANOTHER FULL 8-YEAR TERM. MESBAH-YAZDI AND RAFSANJANI ARE COMPETING FOR THE POSITION OF ASSEMBLY SPEAKER AFTER MESHKINI EVENTUALLY VACATES THE POST, WHICH WOULD GIVE EITHER MAN THE ABILITY TO INFLUENCE THE SELECTION OF THE NEXT SUPREME LEADER IN HIS FAVOR.

WILL PEOPLE VOTE?

7.(C) OBSERVERS AND ANALYSTS, INCLUDING SEVERAL IRPO INTERLOCUTERS, PREDICT LOW VOTER TURNOUT, DESPITE THE CONCURRENT MUNICIPAL AND MAJLES BY-ELECTIONS. THE ASSEMBLY MEETS ONLY TWICE A YEAR; ITS ACTIVITIES ARE NOT MADE PUBLIC AND APPEAR TO HAVE MINIMAL EFFECT ON THE DAILY LIVES OF IRANIANS, LEAVING THEM LITTLE INCENTIVE TO VOTE. EVEN IN THE EUPHORIA FOLLOWING PRESIDENT MOHAMMAD KHATAMI'S PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION VICTORY OF 1997 WHICH FEATURED WELL OVER 80 PERCENT VOTER TURNOUT, THE 1998 ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS ELECTION ONLY ELICITED A 46 PERCENT VOTER TURNOUT, AND REGISTERED A PALTRY 37 PERCENT TURNOUT IN 1990.

8.(C) COMMENT: THIS ELECTION WILL BE INTERESTING TO WATCH TO SEE IF RAFSANJANI AND REFORMERS COALESCE TO COUNTER MESBAH-YAZDI IN ANY MEANINGFUL WAY OR WHETHER THERE IS IN FACT A REAL SUPPORT GROUP FOR MESBAH-YAZDI. SEPARATELY, ONE CHALLENGE TO THE US IS HOW TO FRAME OUR PUBLIC STATEMENTS ABOUT THIS ELECTION. ON THE ONE HAND, WE ALWAYS CALL FOR FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS, AND IN THE CASE OF IRAN, SPEAK OUT AGAINST THE VETTING OF CANDIDATES BY THE GUARDIAN COUNCIL. ON THE OTHER HAND, WE DO NOT SUPPORT THE ENTITY WHICH IS BEING ELECTED, A BODY LIMITED TO CLERICS WHOSE MAIN RESPONSIBILITY IS TO SELECT THE SUPREME LEADER. WE FREQUENTLY CITE AS A WEAKNESS OF THE IRANIAN SYSTEM THE FACT THAT ITS LEADER IS NOT DIRECTLY ELECTED BY THE POPULATION. THIS YEAR THE ELECTION IS BEING HELD CONCURRENTLY WITH THE MUNICIPAL AND MAJLES BY-ELECTIONS, WHICH MEANS THAT WE SHOULD MAKE A BLANKET STATEMENT FOR FREE AND FAIR ELECTIONS. HOWEVER, IF WE DO NOT COMMENT SPECIFICALLY ON THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS, WE GIVE THIS BODY IMPLICIT APPROVAL. (IT MAY BE USEFUL TO TRY TO FIND OUT HOW THE US COMMENTED ON THESE ELECTIONS EIGHT YEARS AGO.) WHILE POLITICAL LEADERS IN SOME DEMOCRATIC COUNTRIES ARE NOT DIRECTLY ELECTED, ONE MAJOR DIFFERENCE IS THAT THE INTERMEDIARY BODY IN IRAN - ALTHOUGH DIRECTLY ELECTED - IS RESTRICTED TO SENIOR CLERICS. (NOTE: REF A MENTIONS AN UNSUCCESSFUL ATTEMPT WITHIN THE ASSEMBLY OF EXPERTS THIS YEAR TO EXPAND MEMBERSHIP BEYOND CLERICS.) IN OUR STATEMENTS WE SHOULD QUESTION THE RATIONALE FOR RESTRICTING THIS POWER TO CLERICS AND ASK WHY THE GOVERNMENT AVOIDS GIVING THIS POWER DIRECTLY TO THE PEOPLE.

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